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OPINION

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What did the President *not* know?

By Daniel Schorr

Washington

PRESIDENT Reagan raised an important issue when he said of Lt. Col. Oliver North, the discharged White House aide who managed the clandestine Nicaragua and Iran operations: "My only criticism is that I wasn't told everything."

Paraphrasing Sen. Howard Baker's famous Watergate question, "What did the President know and when did he know it?" the question now is, "What did the President *not* know and *why* did he not know it?"

Surely Mr. Reagan knew that Colonel North, a favorite of his, a sort of Rambo surrogate known for his involvement in risky secret ventures, would resort to unconventional means to accomplish presidential ends.

The President knew that North had ridden herd, for the White House, on the mining of Nicaragua's harbors in 1984. He knew that, when Congress banned military aid to the Nicaraguan contras, he had encouraged North to seek private and foreign assistance to keep supplies flowing until the administration could induce Congress to reverse its decision.

Reagan knew – perhaps not in great detail – that his aide had managed to create a network of military friends from Vietnam days – including two retired major generals, John Singlaub, Army, and Richard Secord, Air Force – to raise the money and charter the planes that delivered arms to the Nicaraguan insurgents.

The President knew, too, that when Robert McFarlane left the post of national-security assistant in December 1985, North would take over the plan for arms deliveries to Iran, which became formalized in an "intelligence finding" signed by the President on Jan. 17, 1986.

The President thus created a pocket covert action facility within the National Security Council to manage secret missions. What, then, was it that he did not know?

Presumably, he did not know the ingenious way that North arranged to advance his two assignments by linking them together. That is, a markup on weapons for Iran would be used to finance the contras. Reagan, had he known, might have enjoyed the irony of making Ayatollah Khomeini an "angel" for the contras.

Why did the President not know about the plan that he now calls "seriously flawed"? Because the managers of secret projects know the importance of maintaining presidential "deniability" about impropriety. Presidents often state their wishes in general; others implement.

President Kennedy talked to his aides about "getting rid of" Premier Fidel Castro. There were at least eight Central Intelligence Agency conspiracies between 1961 and 1965 to assassinate the Cuban leader.

A decade later, the CIA's Richard Helms testified before a Senate investigating committee, "I believe it was the policy at the time to try to get rid of Castro, and if killing him was one of the things to be done in this connection, that was within what was expected. . . . Any of us would have found it very difficult to discuss assassinations with the President of the United States. I believe we all had the feeling that we're hired to keep these things out of the Oval Office."

Yet, the rigorous investigation turned up no Kennedy order for assassination, and all the late President's intimates testified that it was inconceivable that he would have wanted such a thing.

Similarly, President Nixon, having raged about national-security leaks, professed not to know about the illegal wiretaps and break-ins employed by the "White House Plumbers" engaged to plug such leaks. And, having demanded "total intelligence" about the Democrats, he seemed surprised to learn about a break-in on Democratic headquarters in June of 1972.

Without seeking to press the analogy too far, it must be noted that Presidents Kennedy, Nixon, and Reagan shared an impatience with the cumbersome procedures of government and improvised their own machinery for direct action. Undoubtedly, all of them were convinced they were exercising some mystical "inherent powers" in the national-security interest.

There is something disingenuous about making Adm. John Poindexter and Colonel North walk the plank for the Iran-Nicaragua caper. What did President Reagan think would happen when he created a pocket CIA in the White House basement to evade the rules and sidestep the mandates of Congress?

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Casey says his agency is blameless

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By Dick Pothier
and Huntly Collins
Inquirer Staff Writers

CIA Director William J. Casey last night reiterated his assertions that the intelligence agency did no wrong in the Iranian arms deal, instead telling reporters at La Salle University, "We did exactly right."

Casey appeared weary as he climbed the steps at the College Union building to attend a dinner honoring Robert C. Ames, a Philadelphia native and 1956 La Salle graduate who was killed in the April 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut.

Casey denied a Wall Street Journal report that he had known last spring that funds from the sale of U.S. arms to Iran were being diverted to Nicaraguan rebels.

"That's absolutely false. It doesn't square with the case," Casey said in response to reporters' questions.

Casey's aides told reporters that he would answer no more questions on the arms deal last night and ushered him into the banquet room. He was to speak after the dinner.

On Wednesday, Casey had spent five hours before a congressional committee investigating the controversial arms sale and testified that the CIA had no role in the fund transfer.

Earlier yesterday, a former director of the CIA, Richard Helms, said it was possible that Casey did not know about the diversion of those funds.

"Yes, I think it's possible, particularly if he didn't want to be informed about it," Helms said in response to a question at a day-long symposium on the Mideast at La Salle. The symposium also was held in honor of Ames.

Saying American students were often "woefully lacking" in knowledge of other cultures, Helms extolled a letter on the cultural differences between Arabs and Americans that was written by Ames to intelligence officers beginning their careers with the CIA.

Ames was director of the CIA's Office of Analysis for the Near East and South Asia when he died in the Beirut bombing April 18, 1983, which killed a total of 49 people.

Urging students to learn about the world views of different cultures, Helms said, "It's a wide, wide world out there."

Helms' praise of the letter brought an angry response from Caryn McTighe Musil, an associate professor of English and one of 37 La Salle faculty members who signed a letter objecting to the symposium because of what they said were its ties to the CIA.

"I was appalled at the racism, the xenophobia, the arrogance toward Third World countries," Musil said of the letter's contents.

Musil said that the symposium presentations were tilted toward the CIA viewpoint and that no Arabs were among the speakers.

The symposium, which drew a star-studded cast of Mideast policy experts, was defended by Edward A. Turzanski, associate director of La Salle's alumni office, which co-sponsored the event with the political science department.

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Casey (left) meets Nancy and Bart Hanlon. Ames, the CIA official honored by the La Salle symposium, was her brother.

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